

Case Study – Developing Skills through the ‘Customer Care and Quality Management’ Course

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This course was developed in line with Government Policy ‘to put people first’ and at the request of the Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms. It was meant for continuous professional development of public officers in customer service excellence through Open Distance Learning (ODL) and was guided by the South African ‘*Batho Pele* Principles’.




<http://www.southafrica.net/index.cfm?SitePageID=386>

Batho Pele Principles were initiated in South Africa more than a decade ago. The South African *Batho Pele* Principles provide one overarching vision to guide public service managers.

Batho Pele is a Sesotho phrase meaning '**People First**', committing the public service to serve all the people of South Africa. *Batho Pele* is about eliminating wasteful and expensive internal systems that were not designed to put the needs of the people first.

It is also about making sure that the public service's financial planning is in line with the public's needs and priorities. *Batho Pele* is a commitment to values and principles.

'Customer' is nevertheless a useful term in the context of improving service delivery because it embraces certain principles which are as fundamental to public service delivery as they are to the provision of services for commercial gain. To treat citizens as 'customers' implies:

-  listening to their views and taking account of them in making decisions about what services should be provided;
-  treating them with consideration and respect;
-  making sure that the promised level and quality of service is always of the highest standard;

✚ responding swiftly and sympathetically when standards of service fall below the promised standard.

Implementing the above requires some specific skills to improve customer care and quality of public services provided by officers.

Development of this course started at the right time when COL organised the first Boot Camp in Mauritius for the Virtual University of Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC). Being one of the participants and introduced to Wikieducator and eXe – the XHTML e-learning editor, I applied what I learnt at the Boot Camp to develop the course as an e-version on a CD-ROM.

It has used most of the features provided by eXe. It has demonstrated that

- individualised, offline, self-paced e-learning increases access and flexibility to training/continuous professional development, effectively and efficiently;
- design and development is possible with simple technology.

Participants were required to draw from their experience to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes. Delivery of this course was challenging. It was different from other continuous professional development courses for public officers:

✚ Mode of delivery: ODL

✚ Medium used: CD-ROM

✚ Mode of assessment: Individual Participant's Portfolio

Objectives of the Course

At the end of the course, participants were expected to

- ✚ explain the importance of customer care in the public sector;
- ✚ identify customers' needs and expectations in terms of public services;
- ✚ explain the features of customer service excellence;
- ✚ deliver & maintain customer service excellence;
- ✚ demonstrate effective customer care skills;
- ✚ respond to customer services problems effectively;

- ✚ handle customer complaints effectively;
- ✚ devise a plan for customer service excellence;
- ✚ monitor and assess the effectiveness of services provided.

Course Content

The course comprised seven Units as follows:

- ✚ Unit 1 – Customer Service Excellence
- ✚ Unit 2 – Importance of Customer Service Excellence
- ✚ Unit 3 – Understanding Customer Service in Mauritius
- ✚ Unit 4 – How to Plan for Customer Service Excellence?
- ✚ Unit 5 – Delivering Customer Service Excellence
- ✚ Unit 6 – Effective Customer Relationship
- ✚ Unit 7 – Monitoring and Maintaining Service Excellence

Fitness for Need and Purpose

MCA's (Mauritius College of the Air) object is to 'promote education, arts, science and culture... Through mass media and distance education methods', while the objectives of MCSAR (Ministry of Civil Service and Administrative Reforms) are to provide timely and quality services to the public, dispense training to public officers to upgrade their skills and knowledge, and to develop expertise and new skills through Distance Learning.

The materials were contained on a CD-ROM: an appropriate mode of delivery because of accessibility and flexibility provided by ICT. Participants could access various relevant resources through appropriate links provided. It also catered effectively and efficiently for a larger number of people. The learning materials have benefited over 3000 participants from different Ministries/Departments.

Meant for public officers, the course targeted clerical staff and above for the first instance. They needed to be computer literate, with access to computer facilities.

The works of Malcolm Knowles and Paulo Freire have provided important concepts for developing this training course.

Paulo Freire (2000) identifies two kinds of education:

- Banking education is teacher-centred.
- Problem-posing education - Dialogue is seen as essential to being able to think about and understand reality.

From the work of Freire and Knowles (2005), the following principles of adult learning are relevant:

1. **Adults bring rich experiences to the training course.** Experience is the richest resource for adult learning. Participants were encouraged to share from their own experiences and to work together towards more effective public services.
2. **Adults are *autonomous* and *self-directed*.** The course was learner-centred and tutors were trained to serve as facilitators while respecting participants and acknowledging their wealth of experience they bring to the course and allowing them to voice their opinions freely.
3. **Adults learn best when they see the connections between what they are learning and how they can apply it in their immediate work situation.** They are goal-oriented and practical, focusing on what is most useful to them in their work. The course objectives were tied to their needs with work-related activities.
4. **Adults learn in different styles.** Provisions were made to engage participants through different learning approaches. This course provided opportunities to engage in discussion and in case studies, role plays and experiential exercises that helped them talk about and address specific problems and challenges they face in their work.
5. **Adults learn better when they have prior relevant information and can see how what they are learning has meaning for them.** All relevant information about the goals and purposes was provided to them prior to the course.

Design and Presentation

Contexts, contents and delivery were discussed, tested and modified to MCSAR's satisfaction. Each participant was assured access to computer facilities. As indicated earlier, the learning design was facilitated by ICT, using eXe, the XHTML e-learning editor. Materials were exported as a self-contained web page onto a CD-ROM. Contents were

- organised into seven Units, with a consistent structure, starting with an introduction to Unit content. Objectives highlighted what participants should be able to do after completing the Unit. The summary reviewed main learning points.
- presented in a reader-friendly, simple language and broken down into short, easily managed chunks with sign-postings and clear instructions for smooth navigation.
- enriched with illustrations with access to attachments (Powerpoint files, word documents, links to websites, etc).

A team of senior experienced public officers ensured contents were accurate, up-to-date, accessible and free of any bias.

Apart from in-built learner support, an induction session and tutorial support were provided. Tutors were experienced senior public officers, briefed through meetings or emails and trained in ODL methodologies, tutoring, their roles and responsibilities and portfolio assessment.

Minimum self-study time was 60 hours spread over twelve weeks. A well-structured learner support contributed to the success of the course.

- An induction session for guidance to participants;
- While participants accessed materials at their own pace, place and time, they organised group work and sought tutorial support in case of difficulty;
- A team of trained ODL tutors – senior officers from the Ministries where participants work – had a mentoring/facilitating role through phone, email and three planned face-to-face tutorials. They also assessed the portfolio developed by each participant and got the required support from the course coordinator;
- Administrative support ensured timely provision of learning materials, all logistics, smooth interface between participants and their place of work.

The Learning-Reflecting-Appling (LRA) principle guided development and delivery of the course. Participants

- **learnt** contents and developed relevant skills and attitudes;
- **reflected** on what they learnt and their current practices;

- **applied** what they learnt to improve customer care and quality of their services.

Learning outcomes were assessed through

- Self-marked assessment activities – self-reflections, problem-based activities, multiple choice and true/false questions. Immediate feedback enabled participants assess their progress.
- A Portfolio – Formal assessment through a portfolio developed from day 1 of the course, as per guidelines. In this practical assignment, participants had the opportunity to bring work-related inputs as per their needs/interests and build on their experience. They provided evidence of their learning, reflection and application of knowledge and skills.

Participants provided feedback

- through phone and email;
- before each face-to-face tutorial;
- through an evaluation questionnaire.

Participants' portfolios and feedback demonstrated the course's success in achieving its aims and objectives.

Impacts on participants' learning included:

- Improved mechanism for handling customer complaints and customer feedback;
- Tools made simpler, more concise and customer friendly;
- Courteous and professional staff behaviour;
- Simpler procedures for timely service delivery.

THE EVALUATION EXERCISE

Evaluation and monitoring are integral components of management of ODL courses/programmes. Feedback from participants was collected through an evaluation questionnaire contained in the CD-ROM with a view to explore ways of improving the

effectiveness of the course. 181 completed questionnaires were collected from a batch of 210 participants. The questionnaire had two parts:

In Part A, feedback was collected regarding the course

- contents
- design
- delivery
- tutor/facilitator
- environment
- assessment
- outcomes

Part B comprised 5 open-type questions related to strengths and weaknesses of the course; the assessment through portfolio; whether they would recommend the course to others and suggestions for improvement of the course.

Findings - Part A

Course Contents

Majority of respondents indicated their general satisfaction as to relevance of the course contents to their job and in achieving objectives of the course. However, a few of them claimed they were not aware of the pre-requisites of the course and did not have the pre-requisite knowledge and skills.

Course Design

Most respondents liked the different elements of course design – clearly-stated objectives, interactivity, practice activities and feedback, structure and flow and integrated adult learning principles. However, 27.6 % respondents said that the pace was too fast.

Course Delivery

All the items related to course delivery were rated satisfactorily. 19.3% of respondents queried about the appropriateness of the CD-ROM.

Course Tutor

Majority of respondents expressed their satisfaction for tutorial support provided. Only 3% of responses indicated dissatisfaction.

Course Environment

Respondents expressed satisfaction regarding tutorial facilities. However, 23.2% of respondents wished to have water dispenser/refreshments and more support from their employer.

Course Assessment

Most respondents found the mode of assessment satisfactory. 16.6% of respondents claimed that the opportunities for them to assess their own progress were not sufficient.

Course Outcomes

97.24% of respondents agreed that course outcomes related to knowledge recall, understanding, application and critical thinking. They agreed that the course lived up to their expectations and they were applying what they have learnt.

Over 70% of them agreed or strongly agreed to statements in items 3,4,5,7,8,11,13,16,17,19,21 – 27 as shown by the following table:

SN	COURSE CONTENT	% Respondents who agree or strongly agree
3	Content is adequate to achieve the objectives of the course.	87.3
4	Course content is relevant to my job.	78.4
	COURSE DESIGN	
5	Objectives were clear to me.	84.0
7	Course activities stimulated my learning and gave me sufficient practice and feedback.	78.4
8	Contents were consistently-structured and cross-referenced where necessary for smooth flow of ideas.	89.5
11	Course is based on a learning model appropriate for adult learning.	78.5
	COURSE DELIVERY	
13	Instructions were clear and navigation through the CD-ROM was easy.	83.4
	COURSE TUTOR/FACILITATOR	
16	Tutor was well prepared for the face to face tutorials and was enthusiastic throughout the course.	82.9
17	Tutor was helpful and encouraged me to put into practice what I learnt.	84.5
	COURSE ENVIRONMENT	
19	Tutorial facility at the MCA was conducive and appropriate.	83.4
	COURSE ASSESSMENT	
21	Portfolio development helped me to	
	21. reflect on what I learnt during the course.	85.6
	22. reflect on my experience.	89.5
	23. apply the customer care principles in my work.	89.5
	COURSE OUTCOMES	
24	Course outcomes related to knowledge recall, understanding, application and critical thinking.	89.0
25	I accomplished the objectives of the course.	76.8
26	The course lived up to my expectations.	74.0
27	I am applying what I learnt in the course.	87.3

Part B

Part B comprised five questions. Responses to the first question ***concerning the most valuable aspects of the course*** were quite diverse. Some of the typical ones included:

- Flexible ODL mode and the media used.
- Learning materials are concise, interactive, learner friendly, well-structured and easy to read.
- Self-reflections and reflective practices.
- It is practical and interactive – tailor-made for civil servants. Stepwise explanation of excellent customer service and its improvement at the workplace - Steps to exceed customer expectations.
- Customer care principles and skills development.
- Development of customer communication skills and interpersonal skills.
- Understanding customer needs and importance of customer service excellence.
- Customer focus - Understanding customer expectations & satisfying them.
- Customer relationship and resolving their complaints.
- Quality management - Quality aspect - Put quality in our work Improving the quality of service.

When asked about the least valuable aspects, responses were diverse, ranging from 'none' to being very bulky. The typical ones included

- Bulky – too much to do in a short time.
- Time constraint – office workload does not allow for time to study.
- Everybody does not have a computer at home.
- Lack of encouragement from management to put into practice what is learnt.
- Inadequate tutor and group interaction.
- Too many activities and time consuming.
- Some aspects difficult to apply.
- Lack of incentives and motivation.
- Long gaps between face-to-face sessions.
- Resources and commitment from management lacking.

- No prior information about the course before enrolment.

The third question was related to relevance and validity of the Portfolio as an assessment tool. - ***What is your opinion about the assessment through your portfolio development? How far does it help reflective practice – that is reflecting on what you learn and putting into practice what is learnt?***

Although a few complained about the fact that development of the portfolio was time-consuming, most of them acknowledged that it was a relevant and valid form of assessment.

Some typical responses included:

- Good means of assessment and helps reflective practice.
- This is new to me – A rich experience. A good experience.
- It is very good, well guided and useful.
- Good but difficult to produce evidence.
- It is a good way to help us reflect on how we should practise what we have learnt. It has helped me to develop and reflect what I have learnt – reflective practice.
- Is a good method of assessment – it enlarges our horizon. Objective way of assessment. Very good way of assessing understanding and progress.
- It brings more consciousness and helps apply what is learnt.
- Helped to realise the improvements that can be made.
- It helps to insert our own reflective part.
- It is an opportunity to use the experience – I can express what I have learnt.
- It has helped me to better understand customer care, the principles and application in everyday life.
- It is the most appropriate mode of assessment – a new way of self-assessment.
- A good practice as it helps to reflect on our behaviours.
- Very good – helps us to correct our bad habits, perform better and serve better.
- It has helped us go through our past experiences, reflect and to deal with similar situations with better attitudes.
- It is well-planned but quite demanding.
- Allows me to ponder over the realities surrounding my work.

- Good – motivates us to put into practice what is learnt.
- It enables the tutor to judge the extent the participant has engaged with the course.

Question 4 prompted respondents as to whether they would recommend the course to others. **All** respondents replied that they would recommend the course. Some mentioned that the course should be accessible to all public officers including Senior Officers and even Ministers!

Findings of the evaluation have been well-received. This form of ODL is well-anchored in the training strategy for public officers. It has paved the way for its adoption as a viable means of education and training in the context of lifelong learning and our knowledge society. Other similar courses have been developed since.

Outcomes of the Course

A number of initiatives were taken at the level of various Ministries/Departments as a result of this course – although we know that the change towards customer service excellence will occur gradually. Some of them include:

- ✚ Sensitisation of employees on the importance of customer service excellence.
- ✚ Development and implementation of customer charters.
- ✚ Better information, education and communication strategies.
- ✚ Developing and putting into practice code of ethics for specific departments in addition to the general code for public officers.
- ✚ Reviewing the processes of the delivery of some services.
- ✚ Improved communication/customer care skills.
- ✚ Reviewing the tools used for delivery of services so that they are more user-friendly.
- ✚ Improving the reception area for customers.
- ✚ Better signage to guide customers.
- ✚ Setting up of customer service departments.
- ✚ Reduction in time for delivery of some services.
- ✚ Decentralisation of some services to reduce travel for customers.
- ✚ Strategies to reduce waste in the public sector.
- ✚ More effective communication with customers.
- ✚ Improved satisfaction of customers.

REFERENCES

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